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ABSTRACT

This study examined the characteristics of part-time students at the University of Calgary (Alberta, Canada) and Athabasca University (Alberta, Canada), an open admissions undergraduate distance education university. Also called adult students or non-traditional students, part-time students have been viewed as a homogenous group despite marked differences. Universities wishing to serve the needs of part-time or nontraditional students must identify the differentiated needs of persons in these groups, and develop coherent policies and strategies to address the needs of the differentiated sub-sets. At Athabasca University in 1994-95, 58 percent of students were not enrolled in a degree or certificate program and 19 percent were Probationary Program students (had not yet successfully completed nine credits or less). The average student registration was for 1.8 courses per student per year. At the University of Calgary, the average age of part time students has declined from 31.4 to 30.5 years between 1985 and 1995. Female part-time students outnumbered males with a narrowing gap, from 62 percent in 1985 to 58 percent in 1995. Overall, part-time student numbers have declined by 31 percent since 1985 and represent a smaller portion of full-time enrollment. Tables detail statistics on part-time students by category and demographics. (JLS)

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Comparative Studies on the Differentiated Nature of Part-Time Students

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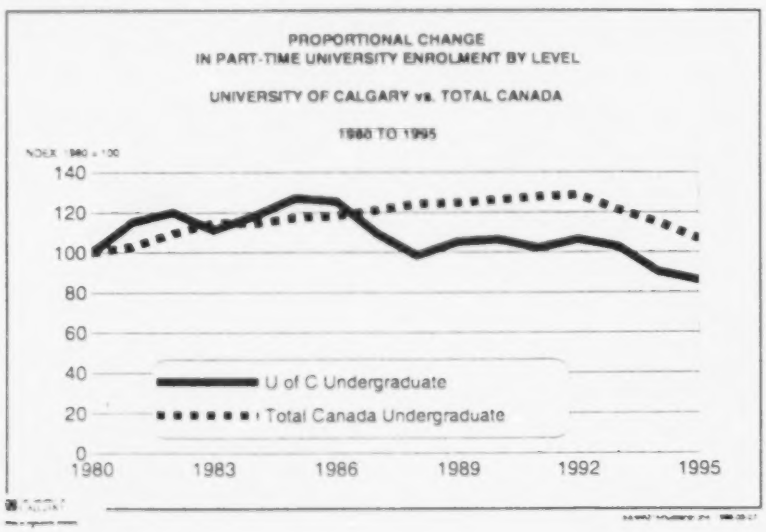
Abstract

University part-time students have generally been regarded as a homogeneous group with relatively uniform characteristics and needs. However, a previous study by the authors indicates this is not so. The part-time student market is segmented and the defining features of each component are quite different. As a result, the particular needs of each sub-group of part-time students can be quite different and call for different institutional responses to providing opportunities for part-time study. The present paper extends the analysis of the previous study by analyzing three additional, more recent cohorts of part-time students. Planning and policy implications arising from these analyses are discussed.

Comparative Studies on the Differentiated Nature of Part-Time Students

In the 1980's part-time students were touted as the salvation of many postsecondary institutions experiencing enrolment declines (Solmon and Gordon, 1981). However, the part-time student population became an increasingly important market in its own right for other reasons as well. This was partly because full-time enrolments continued to grow at a stressful level in most universities and part-time study became something of a pressure release for the demand for full-time places. In addition the tuition fee revenue generated by part-time students became a welcome source of income resulting from at-the-margin growth. Undoubtedly, though, a major force in the development of part-time study has been pressure to constantly upgrade one's general education level and job-related knowledge in response to a rapidly changing work environment.

In Canada, enrolment in part-time university level study peaked in 1992 at 316,000 and has declined to an estimated 266,000 for 1995 (Statistics Canada). Declines in part-time enrolment have been approximately 6% per year since 1992. Whether this decline represents the beginning of a long-lived downward trend remains to be seen. Part-time enrolments at the authors' university have tended to bounce around more with the onset of a general decline occurring in 1985. Since that time part-time numbers have declined by 31% and represent a diminished percentage of full-time enrolment (30% in 1985; 17% in 1995). However, both national figures and institutional figures show a similar down turn in 1992. These trends are shown in the following graph.



In the United States, the number of part-time students is reported to have increased 138% from 2.1 million in 1970 to about 5 million in 1990 (compared to a 34 percent increase in full-time enrolment during that period from 5.3 million to 7 million) (O'Brien, 1992). The National Center for Education Statistics data reported in the O'Brien paper project a steady increase in part-time enrolments to 5.4 million in 1995 and 5.7 million by 2002. However, a similar trend had been projected in Canada and the recent down turn was quite unexpected. It remains to be seen if the trend will also reverse itself in the U.S.

It is still not entirely clear what was driving the significant increases in part-time enrolments throughout the 1980's and early 1990's, resulting in what was claimed at the time to be "the new majority" (Campbell, 1984). As useful as that would be to know even now, the recent unexpected and precipitous decline in part-time students reported in Canadian universities adds to the importance of understanding better what is happening to the demand for part-time study.

The literature and research on part-time students typically represent these students as a homogeneous, undifferentiated whole. Perhaps at some time in the past this was the case. However, many universities have found it necessary to create special student classifications to accommodate what is clearly a differentiated demand for part-time study.

A previous study (Shale and Kelly, 1989) elaborated on this point by analyzing the composition and characteristics of part-time students at their university (a four year, comprehensive research institution). The distinctions they were able to draw among part-time students were based on various mixtures of educational background, program intention and to some extent on age. Their data showed the various sizes of the identifiable sub-groups and some of their characteristics which allowed the authors to speculate about the differentiated nature of the demand behind part-time study and why such different requirements should be considered in the provision of part-time study. Because two cohorts of part-time students were analysed in this previous study, it was also apparent that the nature of the demand for part-time study varied over time and in response to various factors such as enrolment restrictions, course provision, scheduling, and so on.

The nature of demand for part-time study and the characteristics of those students generating the demand seem less clear than has been the case in the distant past. For one

thing, the traditional point of distinction between part-time and full-time students has blurred with full-time students gradually lowering their course loads which in turn, increases the time they take to complete a degree program. However, despite the convergence of full-and part-time student course loads, part-time students have clearly not been "just like" full-time students. Part-time study has developed more as a matter of continuing education. Has this trend continued - or has the development of part-time study taken an evolutionary turn?

The present study is a further analysis of the differentiated demand for part-time study exhibited by cohorts of students during the period of growth to the present time of decline. The results from our analysis of part-time students enrolled in a conventional, campus-based university will be compared and contrasted to data on students enrolled at a local distance education university. This latter group of students represents a large, and largely untapped, pool of part-time students that does not usually emerge through conventional forms of part-time study - but which can be seen in the large enrolments at contemporary university distance education providers. The differences and similarities between these groups of students will be informative in further elaborating on the emerging nature of part-time study.

What is a Part-Time Student?

The administrative criterion that adjudicates this matter is some specified level of course load. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in the U.S. defines part-time students as "those who enrol with a total credit load less than 75 percent of the normal full-time credit load" (O'Brien; 1992; pg. 2). At the authors' institution, The University of Calgary, a part-time student is one who carries fewer than 3 courses, where 5 is considered to be a full course load. From an administrative point of view, it is of some interest to inquire why such a distinction is made and what it means. However, it's an open question as to whether the distinction, as it has historically taken form, should be perpetuated.

Although we may recognize that part-time students study part-time for various reasons, we usually talk about part-time students in the aggregate, emphasizing certain characterizations and ignoring others, steadfastly pursuing a stereotypical view of part-time students. One of the consequences of this view is a tendency to substitute descriptive terms for our, albeit indeterminate, sense of the part-time student. For example, "part-time student" is frequently

used synonymously with "adult student", "mature student" and even for "non-traditional student". These terms give the impression that there is some common understanding of these part-time students when, in reality, there are very important qualitative differences among this group. For example, one subset of the adult, part-time student body includes people seeking advanced mid-career preparation. These people are already well educated and well launched into careers. Their needs, and universities' responses to these needs are specific and well defined. On the other hand, another subset of the adult part-time student body consists of people who enrol in first degree programs as adult students. These students, as first time enrolees in a university setting require a different set of responses on the part of a university.

The part-time student body consists of disparate groups with disparate, if not competing needs, and this has to be recognized. By differentiating among different kinds of demand for part-time study, we can avoid the kind of discussion that emphasizes the provision of part-time study opportunity afforded one group of students to the point of excluding or overlooking consideration of other requirements for other groups of part-time students. The question is not whether the purpose of part-time study should be to provide a second chance to the educationally disadvantaged or to provide professional upgrading to the already well educated. Part-time study can provide for both purposes and need not be exclusive to any particular need.

What is important is the extent to which an institution chooses, as a matter of policy, to emphasize one aspect of part-time study over the others - and what the institution might do to operationalize its support of part-time study. Too often part-time students are ill-defined by virtue of haphazard policies and, in consequence, are often poorly accommodated by the host institutions. Universities claiming service to part-time/nontraditional students as a part of their mandate must necessarily advance a coherent set of policies and strategies to address the differentiated needs of differentiated sub-sets of part-time students.

Segments of the Part-Time Student Body

This section of the paper is meant to illustrate the segmentation of part-time students which was described in general terms above. We use data obtained on the student body at The University of Calgary. This case study is intended to be illustrative only because observations on this group of students may well be a product of the influences of policies regarding part-time study at The University of Calgary and consequently may not generalize well to other circumstances. The University of Calgary data will be supplemented with student data obtained on Athabasca University, a local distance education university, partly to illustrate the point about institutional policies strongly influencing the nature of the part-time student body and partly to illustrate in a different context, characteristics of subsets of what are generically called part-time students.

At The University of Calgary, a part-time student is one who takes fewer than three half courses per term, five such courses being considered a normal full-time student course load. The first level of analysis used to differentiate part-time students is according to whether they are ***pursuing a degree***. These students are further subdivided into:

a) ***Degree students*** - these students have fulfilled normal admission requirements and are registered in courses for credit towards an undergraduate degree; in general, we can think of these students as the part-time equivalent of full-time undergraduate students.

b) ***After Degree students*** - these students wish to acquire a degree subsequent to receiving one or more approved undergraduate degrees. By definition, these students are already well educated and older, at least by virtue of having spent 4 or 5 years at university.

c) ***Diploma students*** - these students wish to pursue a post-degree program which provides for advanced study. As with the After Degree students, these students are well educated and older.

d) ***Non-Matriculated adults*** - these students are 21 years of age or older and unable to meet the normal educational requirements for admission to the University.

Students who are part-time, who have not gained admission to a degree program (which may be by choice, or because of insufficient academic admission credentials), and are

therefore ***registered in courses but not pursuing a degree***, are called unclassified students. Unclassified students may be subdivided into:

a) ***Unclassified Degree students*** - these students are similar to the After Degree and Diploma students in that they are holders of an approved degree. They enrol in courses but do not enrol in a program leading to another degree or diploma.

b) ***Unclassified Non-Degree students*** - These students are not admitted to a program of studies leading to a degree or diploma because they lack sufficient educational preparation. These students can be quite heterogeneous with respect to educational level. Some of these students might not have complete high school matriculation while others could be quite well educated but without a degree.

Table I indicates the distribution of students in each of these categories for selected Fall terms, 1985 to 1995. One of the most striking features of these data is that the proportion of part-time students pursuing a degree has increased from 43% to 58% in this ten year period. Over the same time frame, there was a substantial drop in the number and proportion of students who had a degree and were at the university taking courses only (from 1,566 students, or 38% of the total to 747 students, or 26% of the total).

Table I
PART-TIME UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS
PURSUING A DEGREE

	Fall Session				
	1985	1988	1991	1994	1995
PURSUING A DEGREE OR DIPLOMA					
Degree Students	1 166	1 100	1 058	1 066	1 320
After Degree Students	196	180	180	122	129
Diploma Students	109	135	131	80	55
Non-Matriculated Students	311	274	211	149	156
TOTAL PURSUING A DEGREE	**1 782**	**1 689**	**1 580**	**1 417**	**1 660**
	43%	**53%**	**48%**	**47%**	**58%**
REGISTERED IN COURSES (not pursuing a degree)					
Unclassified with a Prior Degree	1 566	990	1 073	813	747
Unclassified Non-Degree	821	510	658	765	463
TOTAL REGISTERED IN COURSES	**2 387**	**1 500**	**1 731**	**1 578**	**1 210**
	57%	**47%**	**52%**	**53%**	**42%**
TOTAL PART-TIME	**4 169**	**3 189**	**3 311**	**2 995**	**2 870**

Data exclude Foothills Hospital, Law, Medicine and joint/shared degree students.
Percentages are rounded.

The sharp decline in 1995 in the Unclassified Non-degree students is thought to be the result of a change in policy at that time allowing such students to enrol full-time. Prior to 1995 these students were allowed to study part-time only. There were 380 full-time non-degree students in Fall 1995. Assuming these were admitted part-time, the students taking courses but not pursuing a degree would still show a decline from 1985 to 1995 from 57% to 49%.

Table II categorizes students according to what might euphemistically be called "educationally disadvantaged" students (non-matriculated plus unclassified non-degree), and those students admitted under traditional academic admission requirements. While each group has remained relatively stable in terms of its proportion of enrolment (approximately one-quarter of enrolment is made up by the non-matriculated and unclassified group of students; three-quarters by the traditionally qualified students), the traditionally qualified students pursuing a first degree are growing in number while the remaining groups with previous university credentials are diminishing.

Table II
PART-TIME UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS
BY ADMISSION CATEGORY

	Fall Session				
	1985	1988	1991	1994	1995
TRADITIONAL ACADEMIC ADMISSION					
Degree Students	1 166	1 100	1 058	1 066	1 320
After Degree Students	196	180	180	122	129
Diploma Students	109	135	131	80	55
Unclassified with a Prior Degree	1 566	990	1 073	813	747
TOTAL TRADITIONAL	**3 037**	**2 405**	**2 442**	**2 081**	**2 251**
	73%	**75%**	**74%**	**69%**	**78%**
NON-TRADITIONAL ACADEMIC ADMISSION					
Non-Matriculated Students	311	274	211	149	156
Unclassified Non-Degree	821	510	658	765	463
TOTAL NON-TRADITIONAL	**1 132**	**784**	**869**	**914**	**619**
	27%	**25%**	**26%**	**31%**	**22%**
TOTAL PART-TIME	**4 169**	**3 189**	**3 311**	**2 995**	**2 870**

Data exclude Foothills Hospital, Law, Medicine and joint/shared degree students.
Percentages are rounded.

There are some interesting changes to the demographics of students studying part-time in 1985 compared to 1995:

- Part-time students are younger. The average age has declined from 31.4 to 30.5 years and the proportion <25 years of age has increased from 21% to 36%. Segmentation of each year's cohort shows that in 1995 there were more students in the <25 years of age category pursuing a first degree and that there were fewer unclassified students (both with and without a previous degree) in the 25-35 and over 35 years of age categories.
- Female part-time students outnumber male part-time students but the proportion of female students has declined from 62% in 1985 to 58% in 1995.
- The proportion of part-time students studying in the evening has declined from 38% in 1985 to 19% in 1995. The largest declines were experienced by those students pursuing a first degree and by unclassified students (both degree and non-degree). One contributing factor which may account for this decline is the drop in evening sections offered at the University which fell from 239 in 1985 to 160 in 1995.
- Since 1985, part-time student numbers have declined by 31% and represent a diminished percent of full-time enrolment.

Table III
PART-TIME UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

	1985	1995
Age Profile		
Percent <25 Years	21%	36%
Percent 25-35 Years	51%	36%
Percent >35 Years	29%	28%
Average Age	31.4	30.5
Percent Female Students	62%	58%
Percent Evening Students	38%	19%
Comparison to Full-Time		
Part-Time Undergraduate Students	4 169	2 870
Full-Time Undergraduate Students	14 102	17 091
Percent Change in Part-Time		-31%
Percent Change in Full-Time		21%
Part-Time as a Percent of Full-Time	30%	17%

Part-time data exclude Foothills Hospital, Law, Medicine and joint/shared degree students.
Percentages are rounded.

While it is true that many groups of part-time students are very different in their characteristics from full-time students, it is interesting to note that the group of part-time students exhibiting proportionate growth and stability in actual numbers (at least at The University of Calgary) are those students pursuing a first degree. In other words, those students who are most "like" full-time students. The group of students whom we might deem "non-traditional" because they are admitted without satisfying the normal academic admission requirements are diminishing in number. So, too, are the "life-long learners" - those students who already have a degree or diploma and who seem to be taking courses out of interest or to advance themselves occupationally.

Although the NCES data reported in O'Brien (1992) do not categorize part-time students in precisely the same way we have in our study, there are some points of comparison worth noting. In 1990, about three-fifths of the part-time undergraduate students were female. The growth in part-time student numbers (as at 1991) was attributable to students who worked and studied part-time (68 percent of part-time students); and students who are older than the traditional college age (25 percent of part-time students were older than 24). It is not clear whether these two groupings of part-time students are overlapping groups or whether they are mutually exclusive. One possible interpretation is that the increase in part-time students is due to working adults studying part-time.

Throughout this paper we state that institutions must be aware of the potential ways in which institutional decisions, often based on budget, can affect various segments of its part-time student population. For example, at The University of Calgary budget cuts resulted in decisions to decrease the number of evening sections offered which in turn affects the availability of courses to students who can only access university study in the evening. Decreased levels of operating funds necessitate increased tuition fees which may act as a disincentive for students to enrol in courses "for interest sake." Some faculties, such as Education, Engineering, General Studies and Social Work have had much larger part-time student enrolment declines than other faculties which may signify curricular changes that result in fewer opportunities for part-time study. These faculty level decisions, in turn, influence institutional part-time numbers. These are issues we will revisit in the concluding section of the paper.

Characteristics of Athabasca University Students

The way in which a university offers part-time study and the way in which it classifies part-time students clearly determines the way in which part-time study manifests itself. In general, part-time study in traditional universities is characterized only by course load, student admission requirements and/or when a course is offered. Combinations of these requirements give us the kinds of students we have discussed thus far. However, only selected kinds of students can study part-time under these conditions. What would part-time students look like if we were to make part-time study more readily available?

Athabasca University (AU) is an open admissions undergraduate distance education university offering baccalaureate degrees in liberal studies (Arts and Science) and administrative studies. The only admission requirement is that a student be 18 years of age or older. All AU courses are available as home study packages which can be studied independently. The University's mandate is to extend access to university level education to those who would not otherwise have an opportunity to undertake study at this level. By "definition," AU students have predominantly been adult, part-time students who generally are employed full-time and have family responsibilities. However, as we will see, the AU student body is interesting from a number of points of view. First of all, AU has been established to facilitate part-time study by adults and deliberate attempts have been made to minimize a number of the barriers faced by students attempting to study part-time at campus-based universities. Examining the nature of AU students gives us some idea of how many and what kind of students might participate in part-time university study under comparatively unrestricted circumstances.

Athabasca University distinguishes 3 broad groupings within its student population:

- As at 1994-95, 58 percent were non-program students. These are students not enrolled in an AU degree or certificate program; they include both visiting students studying at another institution and "life-long learners", adults furthering their education but with no intention of completing a degree or certificate.
- About 19 percent of 1994-95 AU students were Probationary Program students; these are students who enrolled in an AU program but who had not yet successfully completed 9 credits (of a required 30).

- Program students comprise about 23 percent of the AU students; these are students enrolled in a degree or certificate program who have completed at least 9 credits.

Course registrations at AU had grown steadily from the 1970's when AU was established, peaking at 19,926 in 1992-93. The average student registration activity has remained relatively constant over a number of years at about 1.8 courses per student per year. (It is interesting to note that this figure has risen gradually over the past decade or so from around 1.4 courses per student). Course registrations dropped somewhat in 1993-94 and again in 1994-95 to a total of 19,253. This mirrors the decline experienced at The University of Calgary and nationwide.

A survey carried out in 1995 (Powell, 1995) indicates that AU students are currently predominantly female (about 65 percent), mostly between 25 and 44 years of age (75 percent), have some university study or a completed degree (84 percent) and come from an urban area (64 percent). About 80 percent were employed outside the home or in a home-based business. Students register in AU courses for reasons ranging from career upgrading to personal development; their intentions vary from transferring credit toward a degree from another institution, to obtaining an AU degree or a non-degree program of study (e.g. personal interest and development). AU seems to serve as a primary educational vehicle for some students and as a means to other ends for other students.

Historically, AU has viewed itself as providing an opportunity for lifelong learning to a nontraditional group of students (ie. working adults with family responsibilities). Clearly, the numbers of course registrations built up by AU over the years indicates a strong demand for the AU style of part-time study. However, AU has reported a rapid growth in the number of "visiting students" over the past few years (Powell, 1995). Visiting students are those concurrently enroled at other postsecondary institutions and taking AU courses to be applied for credit at the students' home institutions. Powell (1995, pg. 2) states: "In 1994 over 1100 graduates from the other three Alberta universities were AU students, indicating that AU performs an important role in increasing the efficiency of the conventional system".

Discussion

There are identifiable subgroups within the AU student population that are analogous to those found among part-time students at The University of Calgary. Differences in student classifications and the aggregation of the student characteristic data available do not allow for direct comparison though. However, the levels of enrolment growth experienced at AU in conjunction with student reports that they are studying with AU primarily because it uses distance education methods and has no admission requirements indicate that the AU student body predominantly represents a different kind of part-time student. Without the opportunity to observe the kind of part-time student emerging from a transformation of conventional university education, we likely would not derive any sense of the magnitude or nature of this need from our studies of part-time students at conventional universities.

However, even within a given university, the character of the part-time student may not necessarily be so much a natural evolution as a product of institutional policies and actions. The longitudinal data reported here for The University of Calgary illustrates this point. For example, as we noted earlier, the percentage of unclassified students with a prior degree (those students taking courses but not pursuing a degree) went from 1,566 students (37% of the part-time student body) in 1985 to 747 students (26% of the part-time student body) in 1995. This seems puzzling given the general impression in the literature that the fastest growing area of demand in university part-time study is for "advanced mid-career preparation" and "life-long learning".

At first glance, one might interpret this decline as an indication of a lessening of this kind of demand for part-time study. However, the real reason is more likely to be that the opportunity for part-time study has diminished over that time. The teaching units suffered a substantial reduction in real dollars in their budgets during that time (while full-time enrolment demand increased) leading to fewer academic staff, consolidations of course sections and reductions in the availability of courses to those wishing to study part-time (especially in courses offered in the evening). At the same time, course capacity in high demand courses was limited and restricted, further constraining the situation. A contributing factor may also be that the constant and considerable increases in course tuition fees have reached a "price break point" such that for many people the value returned is not commensurate with the cost.

Similarly, the growth in the number and proportion of students pursuing a first degree is likely related to a number of factors. At the University of Calgary, on average, full-time undergraduate students have gradually been decreasing their course loads. It seems reasonable to assume that the number of full-time undergraduate students converting to part-time would increase under such circumstances (a lightly loaded full-time student would only need to drop a course or two to fall under the boundary of a full-time student). Is this a preferred pace of study? If it is, then these students may be viewed as the emergent prototypical part-time students. It is also well documented that more students carry significant part-time employment. Perhaps there is a lifestyle force at play wherein many undergraduate students prefer to combine work and study at the same time. Perhaps it is becoming more of an economic necessity given the rate of increase in tuition fees and the increasing unavailability of reasonably paying jobs. If this is the case, then the implications for the university and for society would be considerable and the old argument about doing away with the part-time/full-time distinction would make sense.

Another possible explanation for the "emergence" of part-time degree students rests on the belief that too many students have been admitted to the University given the amount of course capacity available. As a consequence, students may not have been able to enrol in their first choice of program or courses. Because of enrolment restrictions and quotas, students may be blocked from entering their faculty of choice so they wait in the system, biding their time by taking whatever courses are available to them. The rapidly increasing number of visiting students reported by AU may be a reflection of students having difficulty with course availability in their own institutions.

To what extent do the data presented in this paper suggest a trend in part-time study and a different, "emerging" part-time student? Will the decline in part-time student numbers continue and will this be mostly at the expense of the older, non-traditional students as well as of the life-long learner? Will the newest of the New Majority, in fact, be part-time analogues of full-time students? We have tried to indicate in our comments that what we are observing is the end result of the effects of thoroughly confounded institutional policies. There do not seem to be clear answers to these questions. However, any university seriously concerned about part-time study will want to consider these questions and the implications that arise from them.

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